



# Gisèle Pineau

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*She raised her eyebrows and it was as if she was lifting the curtain behind which, trembling from having been caught, lay those three accomplices: the past, oblivion and memory.*

— The Drifting of Spirits (37)

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1956
- \* Lived in Guadeloupe, the Congo, Martinique, and Paris
- \* Prominent member of the Creolité movement

## Biography

Acclaimed writer Gisèle Pineau was born in Paris in 1956 of parents from Guadeloupe. Due to her father's military career, Pineau spent the first fourteen years of her life living in Guadeloupe, the Congo, Martinique, and primarily Paris. At the age of five her family visited their native Guadeloupe during her father's leave of absence, returning to Paris shortly after in the company of Pineau's grandmother Man-Ya. Man-Ya filled the cultural void of Pineau's virtually non-existent Guadeloupean identity, providing direct access to an Antillean heritage that became a powerful tool in combating the adversity of a racist métropole.

Pineau's family residence in the Parisian suburb of Kremlin-Bicotre exposed young Gisèle to intense racial persecution by her peers. She was the only student of color in an all-white classroom and frequently encountered white classmates who cried "dirty negresse" and commanded her to "return home" (Sourieau 172), forcing her into a psychological state of displacement. Consequently, Paris is represented as a Mecca of despair, a milieu of exclusion and open hostility towards immigrants, in Pineau's novels.

This page was researched and submitted by April Adamson, Michael Koerpel, and Maggie Majewski on 5/7/05



# Gisèle Pineau

## Biography continued

At the age of fourteen, Pineau returned with her family to Guadeloupe and attended St. Joseph's at Cluny. After three years on the island, she returned to Paris, where she enrolled in the University at Nanterre. She studied classical literature, which became influential in her own style of writing without overshadowing the Antillean oral tradition. Her subject matter leans toward the thematic nature of Pineau's own alienated, displaced and marginalized identity. Despite her devotion to literature, she was forced to end her studies due to a lack of finance, dropping out and entering a psychiatric nursing program at the centre Hospitalier de Villejuif, while continuing to write.

Pineau is recognized as a prominent member of the Creolité movement in which Caribbean writers re-examine their position in a world that has pejoratively displaced them. Subjected to a life experience of migration between France and the French Caribbean, Pineau's work adds to a collective diasporic discourse on displacement by immigration. The strength in Pineau's writing is recognized in her ability to mask themes with vivid metaphors. Her stories communicate an attempt to identify the essential meaning of home. In the characters' construction of home, their struggle is directly linked to recovering a solid definition of a continuously evolving cultural identity. Her most striking theme conveying the concept of home as displaced or absent of a sedimentary identity is incest.

Njeri Githire, in critiquing Pineau's work, states that, "in [Pineau's] repeated depiction and examination of incest, she forges a mind-altering portrait of the domestic sphere in her oeuvre and calls for a re-evaluation of the meaning of home for West Indian women" (Githire 87). Githire continues that, "For the women in Pineau's works ... home is a place wrecked by domestic violence and abuse – both mental and physical – with the perpetrators being the men closest to the victims" (Githire 87). In Pineau's second novel, *Macadam Dreams*, this point is affirmed through the incestuous rapes of two characters, Eliette and Angela, who are both raped at home by their fathers. In describing Angela's rape, Pineau writes, "when the beast tore her panties off, Angela wanted to call to her mama, but a voice called her Judas, so she kept the call locked in her throat ... She closed her eyes from seeing him" (153). Angela's father raping her creates a destructive dynamic within her home that destroys her family. Once that is taken away, the victim's identified life is fragmented, shattering any sense of security symbolized by home. Home becomes identified as a space of abuse, far from a traditional symbol of nourishment, support and safety.



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## Biography continued

In addition to the fragmentation of home illustrated through incest is Pineau's backdrop of natural disaster. The use of devastating acts of natural disaster are figurative representations of human acts of violent abuse. In a passage describing these effects, Pineau uses the cyclone of 1928 to symbolize the post-traumatic effects of Eliette's rape. The passage reads, "[... the cyclone of 1928 was] so bad that she'd been unable to speak for three full years, it had wounded her in the head, and the belly, had disposed her of all faith in herself [...]. Eliette was eight years old. The cyclone had made her like this, cowardly, indifferent, weak and inactive [...]. It was her Mama that had told her about the night when Guadeloupe had capsized in the cyclone and been smashed to bits. She called that nightmare the Passage of the Beast. And to better burn the story into Eliette's mind, she was constantly rehashing the memory of the head and belly wound, the bloodstained sheets, the big beam that fell and nearly cut Eliette in two, the cruel wind penetrating, buffeting, lashing" (88). The violent experience of the cyclone mirrors the violence of Eliette's rape: both incidences occur in her eighth year. Pineau uses the label "Beast" in association with the cyclone and again in conjuring the violent actions of her father. The fall of the tree, the beam that "nearly cuts her in two," becomes a phallic symbol depicting the father's violation of Eliette's body. Her head wounds symbolize psychological devastation and the belly wound the physical devastation of her underdeveloped reproductive organs. Through Eliette's character, Pineau is able to voice the destruction that occurs from incestuous rape.

The theme of incest resurfaces in *The Drifting of Spirits*. Its portrayal differs from *Macadam Dreams* in that the sex is consensual between the twins Paul and Céluta—"they swore that with Paul (her own brother!) she lived like husband and wife" (198). Paul and Céluta's incestuous behavior marks them as problem children; "[...] Paul and Céluta, the devil incarnate" (151). In actuality, their descent into violence and consensual incest is symptomatic of their struggle to define themselves in the unstable environment of departmentalized Guadeloupe, an island founded on the trauma of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. As a result, their lives reflect a crisis of identity. They rebel, they experiment, and they travel. They are in a constant state of transitional commotion. This marks their internalized attempt to recover and stabilize a shifting cultural identity. Paul migrates to and from the métropole, and Céluta installs herself at the shipping docks, a symbolic milieu of transition and displacement. Yet, in their experimentation, a firm sense of autonomy is never solidified.



# Gisèle Pineau

## Biography continued

As Murdoch states in her essay on immigrant narratives in contemporary France, it feels foreign at “home” or “away.” The implications of their act of incest along with their violent behavior, however abnormal or self-destructive, give them a problematic sense of security. This problematic sense of agency is an effort at self-affirmation within a space where the post-colonial wreckage of racism, sexism, and socio-economic and political instability challenge the definition of home and identity. Incest, along with violence, hustling and prostitution, becomes a coping mechanism to deal with the fragmentation and displacement of home.

*Exile According to Julia* furthers Pineau’s themes of longing for stability and longing for a sense of self and a home. This autobiographical work is Gisèle Pineau’s third novel and a tribute to the grandmother who provided her with pieces of this precious belonging. In return Pineau bears tender witness to this grandmother, Man-Ya (a.k.a. Julia of the title), revealing her joyous secrets of life in the process. A native of Guadeloupe, Julia is uprooted and moved to Paris against her will. The only positive aspect of this upheaval is her attempt to fill the nameless void within all her “exiled” Parisian grandchildren, who are growing up “in the prison of these concrete houses [of Paris], losing the way to good sense, wandering about so far from the essences of life [...] dulling feeling, taste and touch” (94). Julia is silently determined to offer her grandchildren an example, taking pleasure in rising early, scrubbing, sweeping, weeding, looking after things and reconciling herself to the earth-- giving the “best part of herself with each word, thought, action” (47). Within her humble servitude lives an inexorable dignity, and it is obvious that Man-Ya represents to her grandchildren all things eternal and whole: generosity, intuition, understanding, respect, honesty, a love of hard work, and deep religious consolation, not to mention delicious Crèole cuisine. *Exile* is an exquisite novel full of sensory detail and emotional clarity. There is a woody organic style to Pineau’s writing -- she can effortlessly string together somewhat odd collections of words, managing to tap into the way the mind wanders by casually passing her hand over the dreamy landscape of subconscious thought. At the times when the narrative transitions into Julia’s first-person perspective, Pineau maneuvers with precision and depth, harnessing the many dimensions that her grandmother undoubtedly possessed. We are left with the knowledge that the narrator’s sense of “belonging” is not necessarily born of one city or a single cultural identity— sometimes the essence of “home” can be found in the lingering spirit, heritage and love of one person. Ultimately, Man-Ya is alive and wholly present, even when she is gone.



# Gisèle Pineau

## Biography continued

Overall, Pineau's critics emphasize the themes of alienation, exile and insecurity of a Guadeloupean cultural identity plagued by natural disaster, racism and sexism. These themes are symbolized through the figurations of abuse, sexual abuse and incest throughout Pineau's work. Her subjects communicate the nature of Pineau's own personal experience while uniting with a Caribbean collective memory demonstrated in the power of the literary arts.

Pineau's writing gives itself entirely, crafted of the body, tears and sweat of the French Antilles. Her novels are for those who like books that howl, sing, spit and swear; books that swing from tree to tree, make faces, tell stories, sleep under the stars, books that make fires, make love, plant gardens, birth babies, books that kick, kiss and cry. Above all, her writing is for those who seek education and scholarship, those who wish to experience the highest and oldest form of truth of the ancient oral tradition: allow these drifting spirits to enter! Invoke Pineau's spirits!



Gisèle  
Pineau

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